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ABSTRACT

Today's educators sometimes make unthinking hasty decisions based on a "Gallup Poll" mentality that holds that whatever the majority of the people want should be implemented. Educators, bowing to public pressure, are sometimes too quick to jump on any bandwagon. One such bandwagon is the current back to basics movement. Insofar as back to basics means turning one's back on everything learned about education in the past, it is a sign that people are not thinking clearly. The basics movement, in emphasizing merely how to read, write, and calculate, fails to emphasize the high importance of what a person reads, writes, and calculates about. Of course, the bandwagon effect is not always bad. For instance, the accountability movement has produced many positive as well as negative effects. Educators, however, must learn to critically question new movements. They must ask not only how to implement new ideas but why they must be implemented. Gallup polls and bandwagons can provide indicators of the proper direction to move, but these indicators must be used wisely. Polls and bandwagons are no substitute for wisdom. (Author/JM)

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GALLUPing to the POLLS
or
H'tching Your Bandwagon to a Slogan[1]

"The world is a comedy to the man who thinks
and a tragedy to the man who feels!" (H. Walpole)

by C. M. Achilles

"Just Once I'd Like to Hear a Brand New Question", borrowed from Rod McKuen's delightful poem in the collection, "The Art of Catching Trains" from his volume Lonesome Cities, might well serve as a title of this article. Let's hear Rod McKuen...

"Sometimes I feel I've always been
just passing through.
On my way away, or toward.
Shouting alleluias in an unseen chior
Or whispering fados down beneath my breath
waiting for an echo
Not an answer.

EVERYBODY HAS THE ANSWERS
OR THEY'LL MAKE THEM UP
FOR YOU.
JUST ONCE I'D LIKE TO HEAR
A BRAND NEW QUESTION."

Today's educators must feel much the same way—They'd probably like to hear a brand new question. While education must respond to public interest and concerns, it certainly should not be driven by uncritical reactions and catchy slogans. Educators must not take hasty, unthinking actions because of a "Gallup Poll" mentality* ("Everybody has the answers or they'll make them up for you"). There must be a proper balance between lay direction in education and blind, unquestioning reliance on professional "expertise". The pendulum is swinging; let's see that it doesn't swing too far.

"Just once I'd like to hear a brand new question" suggests that we educators (as my father used to say) need to use our heads for something other than hatracks. So, let's use our heads for something besides hatracks—let's look at some propositions that may be unpopular.

Do education's pace-setters, the leaders and administrators have the fortitude to get out front and stress important issues. One such issue is to analyze and, if needed, redirect the Bandwagon Effect that comes along ever so often. Administrators, of course, cannot do this alone; all educators should cooperate to change some public misconceptions and inform the public about some realities we face. As leaders in education, do we have the knowledge,

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[1]By C. M. Achilles, Professor, Educational Administration and Supervision, College of Education, University of Tennessee, Knoxville 37916. Talk prepared for Secondary School Principals, ETEA, October, 1977.

*Gallup Poll mentality is not my expression. It is from Walter Gropius, The Scope of Total Architecture, p. 86.

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skills and resources to take important stands, or are we primarily public servants who react aimlessly to Gallup Polls and Bandwagons? Some research suggests that educators don't have the inclinations or backbones to resist.* They'd rather ride the bandwagon.

The tenacity with which schools resist change has puzzled many. Years of research have focused on the problem. Results of some of these studies have appeared in the professional literature. I'd like to share with you some of the findings. (Although these results relate directly to administrators, they may be pertinent for all educators, and especially those educators who emerge as leaders even among the ranks of teachers.)

Zeigler, a political scientist, had been studying why schools were slow to change. He first analyzed the School Board role and then turned to administrators (specifically Superintendents). ("Roadblocks to Reform", CEDAR Report, II, 3, April, 1973).

> "What the superintendent generally wants, unfortunately for reformers and critics, is status quo. And this stance isn't surprising. . . . . When most of today's superintendents were still classroom teachers. . . . they were quiescent, conservative, and respectful of authority. Those who didn't accept these norms dropped out.
>
> Surviving male teachers, then, tended to become more politically conservative and to develop an unusually high need for respect, an exaggerated concern for authority, and a personal rigidity and a fear of risk-taking behavior.
>
> Richard O. Carlson has spent years researching school superintendents. His studies confirm Zeigler's assessments. Carlson has found, for example, that only about 10 percent of all male teachers last longer than five years. Consequently . . . sheer perseverance seems to be a contingency of the career path of the superintendent. . . . [S]uperintendents generally come from rural or small-town environments and from working-class families. . . given their humble origins and the development of a defensive response to criticism, over-compensation is virtually guaranteed." (CEDAR Report, p. 4).

Frankly, that's not a picture of dynamic leadership out in front pulling others along! It more represents someone who responds to public pressure without taking the time to consider possible consequences of the "Gallup Poll" mentality. W. Gropius, the architect, addressed a similar point in The Scope of Total Architecture.

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*Maybe we should take note of what Lawrence Dennis, writing in the 1930's said about schools and educators. "As one of the lesser agencies of education, (the home, the workplace, the marketplace, the press, and the radio are far more important) the school is expressly charged with the function of contributing to the formation of attitudes as a part of the processes of causing persons to undergo the experiences of learning, thinking, and judging. As the school specialist is normally the hired man and an instrument of government of those who exercise a directive influence over government in the broadest sense of the term, the school normally aims to create right attitudes towards the prevailing social order."

"The great avalanche of science and progress has left the individual bewildered and restless, unable to adjust himself and often pitifully lacking in moral initiative. We have developed a Gallup Poll mentality, a mechanistic conception; we rely on quantity instead of on quality, on memory instead of on ideas; we yield to expediency instead of forming a new conviction." (Gropius, p. 86) [Emphasis added.]

[Education] needs conviction and leadership. It cannot be decided upon by clients or by Gallup Polls, which would most often only reveal a wish to continue what everybody knows best." (Gropius: 86). [Emphasis added. Gropius, of course, said "Architecture"].

The present lack of status of most political leaders who were elected via image makers and polltakers demonstrates this Gallup Poll mentality. Once leaders finally get to power (often by selling their convictions to raise money and gain votes) we find they have little analytic ability, no personal philosophy or merit, and few solid, ethical values; they are now unable to take a stand or oppose the group (and vested interests). But, like Caesar's wife, leaders must be above suspicion. (How do you feel about the House probe of Koreagate?)

Let's be specific. Here I've called it: "Hitching your Bandwagon to a Slogan". It's easy to worship a slogan and get on the bandwagon. This is usually done with little serious contemplation. One example is the following.

"In the past men relied on the least elaborate part of the circular system, the dependent learning by children for continuity of man's mission and for the embodiment of the new. . . . We must create new models for adults who can teach their children not what to learn but how to learn and not what they should be committed to but the values of committment." (Margaret Mead, Culture and Committment, p. 72).

What Margaret Mead said was pertinent for the late 60's and early 70's. What about today? Should we rely on "dependent learning by children" or should we be creating new models. . .?

Educators apparently did an exceptional job of teaching youngsters to think, to question, and to be committed. This was in reply to the public outcry over Sputnik. Our reward for that success has been the current inane slogan, "Back to the Basics". Educators successes caused youngsters to think and to question the moribund and decadent society which was trying to control them. (Viet Nam, Watergate and Korea-gate are examples). The youngsters looked around and rebelled. This threatened the power structure (and the schools and family). So now we're "Back to the Basics". Teach youngsters to read and write. For heaven's sake, don't teach them to think.

On the other hand, maybe this "Back to the Basics" movement is only subterfuge, or maybe I have misinterpreted it. The gap between those who can think and those who think well is getting greater every year. Average years of school completed is increasing; literacy is increasing (and these are measures of Basics). However, to some it is evident that, using some measure--usually

college entrance exams that very few took twenty years ago--some youngsters are missing "The Basics". (What kind of a measure is the SAT for "The Basics"?)

It's easy to coin a slogan. It's easy to worship words. It's easy for scared parents and teachers who want to return to a point of absolute, unquestioning control to harp on a slogan. It's also easy for educators to overlook the facts and accede uncritically to public clamor.

If, on the other hand, by "Back to the Basics" we mean a concern for humans, for values, for commitment and conviction, for honesty and for clear thinking, then perhaps the slogan is meaningful. Certainly if we intend to relinquish the challenge of encouraging youngsters to think and once again focus only on reading and writing, we are vulnerable to criticism--a much more serious criticism than that which appears to underly the "Back to the Basics" movement.

Let's give ourselves over to fantasy for a moment. Let's do a little group imagining. Imagine that you have a serious infection. As you approach the physician's door, you see a sign which proclaims:

> "We eschew penicillin and antibiotics; we operate without anesthetics and antisepsis. We have gone back to blood-letting and we use maggots to clean infections. We practice the basics of medicine."

You decide to consult a local lawyer regarding possibilities of a malpractice suit. As you enter the lawyer's office you see the sign:

> "We do not believe in trial by jury; we have gone back to the basics: trial by combat and the law and of an Eye for an Eye and a Tooth for a Tooth."

So, being somewhat dismayed, you decide to go to the airport and fly to some more civilized country. As you approach the airport you see:

> "Pilots flying from this airport have abandoned jet travel. They use the basics gliders and balloons.

Think how I, as a parent, feel when I approach your buildings only to see that you are turning your backs on all that we have learned about education in the past years and are accepting an uncritical excursion into nostalgia; "Back to the Basics". Indeed, the idea of back (back to anything) is distasteful except as nostalgia or as new data show that the old way was too hastily abandoned in the first place. "Back to" is a sure sign that the public is not thinking; it's a clue that people are muddled and confused. It's adherence to a catchy slogan by trading on the bandwagon effect. Part of it is a vacuum in leadership and communication. According to William Van Til, (Wanted: Effective Communication", Kappan, 59, 1, September, 1977, p. 53-4):

> "In the later 1970's there is a dearth of communication by educators with the general public. When did you last see an outstanding spokesman for better schools on your TV set?... Since the media, along with Nature, abhor a vacuum, contemporary journalism has latched onto back-to-basics stories. . . .

> The 1977 Gallup Poll in this Kappan reports that 57% of adults sampled have not heard or read about the back-to-basics movement. Yet of those who are aware of the phrase back-to-basics, 83% favor it. We have failed to communicate the high importance of what a person reads, writes, and calculates about; we have not pointed out that it is dull traditional instruction and inadequate family surroundings and obsession with TV that inhibit learning both the old and the new basics. . . . We have not described the importance of problem solving through the exercise of intelligence as a road to morality in our democratic society." (p. 54).

Perhaps here is one key to "The Basics". "We have failed to communicate the high importance of what a person reads, writes, and calculates about. . . ."

Is the Bandwagon Effect always bad? Probably not. Its detrimental effects appear when we let slogans become driving forces behind uncritical acceptance of trivia; it exemplifies the "Good News—Bad News" motif. A recent example is ACCOUNTABILITY. The good news was that the accountability bandwagon forced us to review what we were doing, to consider alternatives, to involve the community. Accountability reminded us to be more conscious of doing what was necessary to provide services and to watch how we spent the public dollar. The bad news included uncritical adoption of the "business model," inappropriate use of PPBS, time lost, and--ironically—attention to trivia rather than basics of education, and so forth. Educators were herded into a business/economic/production model through undue worship of the advertised successes of American business and industry. Educators were herded into a logical/scientific model through unwarranted worship of "the scientific method". Currently, however society is once again coming to recognize that the unthinking and uncritical application of benefits produced by both science worship and business worship is rushing us headlong into problems of our own making, problems such as environment, population, energy, inflation, etc. Unfortunately educators began to consider accountability mostly in terms of numbers of things; number of students or credit hours taught, number of committees, number of articles, number of speeches, etc. This is a production model. Maybe it is an adequate way to deal with assembly-line products. However, each student (some accountability-minded people, adhering to a production model, even call them "products") is a prototype—one of a kind. The "body count" approach looks only at easily quantifiable things and forgets that important things may not be so easily quantifiable. (Its not just that a person acts; but how the person acts)

Our worship of the production model caused us to overlook such things as the Lockheed scandal, the C5A fiasco, the Penn Central, the wondrous world of Amtrack schedules, oil spills, shoddily built cars and appliances, and many other examples we could cite (Is this the business model)? We overlook or conveniently forget some misguided scientific applications, such as multiple war-head missiles, megaton bombs, gases to maim and kill humans, the neutron bomb, etc. We sometimes scurry, sheep-like, to comply with government mandates or edicts forgetting the ease with which government officials can themselves be misguided. Let's not forget Watergate, Koreagate, lobbying and logrolling for pet projects, junkets, Congress' exclusion of Congress from Congressional laws and other legislative inanities. (Congress recently issued a priority for higher

education to develop, operate and evaluate "innovative educational solutions to the national problem of citizen alienation from governmental processes".* Let's educate the people to not be alienated. For heaven's sake, don't ask why they're alienated!).

While education has gained much from science and management techniques, we should remember that there is more. We must be concerned with questions of "who?," why?," and "whether or not," and not just with questions of "how?". Whitehead has said ". . . There is a quality of life which lies always beyond the mere facts of life" and also, "There is not a sentence which adequately states its own meaning. There is always a background of presuppositions which defies analysis by reason of its infinitude". These ideas parallel Polayni's concept of "tacit knowing". Complete objectivity is probably only a delusion. Tacit and personal knowledge is always present. Total objectivity is not possible; the process of knowing involves both the knower and the object of knowledge. It is not possible to keep the knower or the seeker out of this interaction. Facts by themselves do not constitute knowledge. Facts become knowledge when unified in a creative mind. Herman Hesse's Siddhartha says it well:

> "Wisdom is not communicable. The wisdom which a wise man tries to communicate always sounds foolish. . . . Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom. One can find it, live it, be fortified by it, do wonders through it, but one cannot communicate and teach it."

Transmission of facts is one thing; it has its place. Educating a mind to understand facts and use them properly is the idea of wisdom (the word wisdom derives from the Latin, video, which means to see and understand). This is the major task of education. This is the "basics". . . This is the NEW BASICS!

Detachment and complete objectivity are not only unattainable but they are false ideals. In the exact sciences, this false ideal probably does little harm; it is often ignored by the scientists anyway. In education, where mankind is what matters the most, this false ideal is capable of untold harm. The aim of education is not merely to produce well informed people, but to lead forth a generation committed to individual worth, to freedom, to democracy, and to humanism.** This job can't be done if educators gallop along uncritically with the herd.

More and more, it seems, we are asking the questions, "How can we do this? How can we use this?" We must also ask the question, "Why do this?" Education is development of human beings--it is humanism in its best sense.. It should extend the mind, strengthen the body and serve as a foundation for appropriate living. It should lead us to question and to seek appropriate answers. As educators we cannot accept being herded onto the Bandwagon. Gallup Polls may provide us with indicators, but we must use those indicators wisely. Polls and Bandwagons are no substitutes for wisdom.

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*Special Community Service and Continuing Education Projects, Instructions and Application forms, CFDA 13.557, 1977. Apparently government sees itself as the "last bastion of the elite."

**Some material in the prior two paragraphs paraphrased and quoted from Malik (see References).

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